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Beyond Ethno-Nationalism: The Post-Nationalist and Intersectional Strategy of the HDP and Its Role in the Democratic Movement in Turkey*

Abstract

The evolution of Kurdish politics in Turkey reveals a significant shift through the post-nationalist and intersectional strategy adopted by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which positions itself within a broader democratic and inclusive movement. Rather than reinforcing ethnic or national divisions, the HDP has sought to transcend them by forging coalitions with left-wing, feminist, ecological, and minority-based movements. This approach reflects post-nationalist theoretical frameworks that emphasise inclusivity, intergroup cooperation, and the reimagining of political community beyond ethnonational boundaries. Although frequently labeled a "pro-Kurdish" party, the HDP articulates a form of inclusive populism that resonates with the theories of Laclau (2008) and Mouffe (2018), advancing a pluralist political vision that redefines notions of belonging and democratic participation within the Turkish context.

Keywords

HDP, post-nationalism, intersectionality, Kurdish politics, democratic pluralism

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Introduction

The article examines the Halklar Democratic Party's (HDP) post-nationalist and intersectional strategy in Turkey, aiming to foster a broader, more democratic and inclusive movement. It highlights how the HDP tries to bridge ethnic and national divides by forming coalitions with left-wing and minority groups, using post-nationalist ideas promoting inclusiveness and cooperation (Gunes and Çetin 2018; Yener-Roderburg 2020). Due to legal persecution and a Constitutional Court case linked to the PKK, the HDP stopped operating under its original name. In 2023, its candidates ran under the Green Left Party (YSP), and later, the movement reestablished as the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), maintaining its core goals and principles. It also reflects on how the HDP, despite being defined as a "pro-Kurdish" party, has shown the characteristics of a populist party, as theorized by Ernesto Laclau (2008) and Chantal Mouffe (2018), contrary to the stereotypical view of a party that only defends the interests of Kurdish agency. Although the party has a substantial Kurdish component, it is embedded within broader democratic practices. It promotes a post-nationalist vision to redefine notions of ethnic and national belonging in the Turkish context. Post-nationalism is seen as a means to find a common humanity and is interpreted as a critical tool against nationalism (Appadurai 1996; Habermas 2016; Jacobson 1996; Sassen 2006; Soysal 1994) and as a theory related to the concepts of hybridity and a new understanding of relations (Sutherland 2012). In this regard, Benedict Anderson (1983; 2007) provides a historical and theoretical perspective, examining how nationalist movements can transcend national boundaries and influence different cultures and political contexts (Kaya and Whiting 2019). Despite this, the portrayal of the HDP as an exclusively pro-Kurdish party has fuelled a hostile rhetoric that has often damaged it, especially in the media and politics, where it has been identified as a threat to the Turkish state. Historically, however, the Turkish state's approach to Kurdish demands for autonomy and recognition has oscillated between repression and limited reforms, illustrating broader tensions over national identity and sovereignty (Coşkan and Ercan 2024; Ozkirimli 2013; Xypolia 2016; Yeğen 2022).

However, the HDP demonstrates how a left-wing and trans-ethnic party can operate within democratic rules, seeking to break down barriers between different ethnic and social groups to promote inclusivity. This study relates to the theories of authors such as Soysal (1994), Jacobson (1996), and Sassen (2006), who propose a concept of post-national citizenship, arguing that inclusivity

and cooperation between different groups, rather than ethnic nationalism, can foster a politics of universal rights and democratic participation. Furthermore, the HDP's post-nationalist approach is intertwined with theories of left-wing populism, particularly the ideas of Laclau (2008) and Mouffe (2018), which emphasise the inclusion of various social groups and the creation of broad coalitions against ruling elites, thus overcoming traditional divisions related to ethnicity and nationhood. The article critically explores the contrast between the post-nationalist and intersectional potential of the HDP and its public perception as a party that threatens stability and national cohesion, analysing its impact on political discourse and the dynamics of inclusiveness in Turkey and the Middle East (Christofis 2021; Celep 2018; Gunes 2020; Grigoriadis 2016). This research analyses the HDP's strategic attempt to construct a post-nationalist and intersectional political identity through its coalition-building practices and discursive positioning within the broader *Türkiyelileşme* (Becoming Turkish) project. Rather than presenting the HDP as a straightforward success story, the study critically examines how its ideological framework has shaped alliances with left-wing and minority movements, while also acknowledging the significant limitations, internal tensions, and external contestations that have challenged the implementation and outcomes of this project. This study systematically investigates the following three core research questions: in what ways have the HDP's post-nationalist and intersectional strategies influenced its political tactics and coalition-building processes with other left-wing movements within Turkey? How has the HDP contributed to the redefinition of concepts related to ethnic and national identity within the Turkish political landscape? To what extent has the HDP impacted political discourses and democratic activism in Turkey through an inclusive approach that transcends ethnic and national boundaries? By addressing these questions, the research aims to assess the HDP's role in reshaping conceptual frameworks of identity, nationalism, and political allegiance in contemporary Turkey.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is based on a meta-theoretical and interdisciplinary approach aimed at exploring the role of the HDP in transforming Turkish political discourse through a post-nationalist and intersectional perspective. This study combines theoretical analysis with a qualitative, document-based empirical approach. It draws on a systematically selected corpus of primary sources, including HDP political programs, election manifestos (from

2014 to 2023), parliamentary group speeches, public addresses by key party figures (notably Selahattin Demirtaş and Pervin Buldan), and policy papers. These documents were chosen based on their relevance to the HDP's discursive construction of identity, coalition-building strategies, and the *Türkiyelileşme* project. The analysis employs a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, drawing in particular on Norman Fairclough's (1992) approach, to examine how language is used to construct inclusive narratives and challenge dominant nationalist discourses. The discourse analysis focuses on recurring themes, including pluralism, minority rights, gender equality, and anti-authoritarianism. In addition, the secondary literature review was conducted through a comprehensive engagement with both Turkish and international academic sources, selected for their contributions to debates on nationalism, post-nationalism, intersectionality, and Kurdish political movements. This dual approach provides a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for interpreting the HDP's political project. The theoretical analysis is structured around three main currents of thought. Theories of post-nationalism, elaborated by scholars such as Yasemin Soysal (1994), David Jacobson (1996), and Saskia Sassen (2006), are central to understanding how the HDP redefines citizenship, overcoming traditional notions of ethnic and national belonging. Such theories emphasise the role of globalization and universal rights in transforming political dynamics, emphasising the importance of politics that value cooperation between different groups. In parallel, the concept of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 1989) and expanded by Patricia Hill Collins (2015), allows us to analyse how the HDP addresses the multiple forms of oppression and discrimination that intersect ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Finally, left-wing populism, theorized by Chantal Mouffe (2018), offers an interpretive key to understanding how the party builds broad alliances against ruling elites, transcending traditional divisions related to ethnic or national identity.

The approach includes a critical discourse analysis of HDP materials, examining its post-national, inclusive narrative and media portrayals as a threat to Turkish stability. It contrasts HDP's progressive vision with mainstream securitarian rhetoric. The study also explores HDP's cooperation with parties like CHP and DEM through campaigns and parliamentary initiatives, highlighting coalition strategies to build a trans-ethnic, democratic platform. This methodology situates the HDP within broader theoretical and comparative contexts, providing insights into post-nationalist politics in the Middle East

(O'Connor and Baser 2018). The research integrates theory and empiricism, analysing HDP's political dynamics and its efforts to form a united left-minority coalition, contributing to understanding repression and polarization in political landscapes.

The HDP: Inclusiveness, Intersectionality and the Challenge to Traditional Nationalism

Prior to the founding of the HDP in 2012, the pro-Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey developed through a series of political parties that sought to articulate Kurdish demands and broader calls for democratization and social justice. These included the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP), active from 2005 to 2009, which followed earlier parties such as the People's Democratic Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, HADEP) and the Democracy Party (*Demokrasi Partisi*, DEP). Each was ultimately banned by the Turkish Constitutional Court, primarily on charges of alleged affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). These repeated closures reveal a structural pattern of exclusion embedded in Turkey's legal and political order. The Turkish state has used Article 68 and 69 of the Constitution, in conjunction with the Political Parties Law and the Anti-Terror Law (Law No. 3713), to equate expressions of Kurdish identity or advocacy for decentralization with threats to national unity. Through this legal framework, prosecutors have targeted party leaders with terrorism-related charges, stripped MPs of parliamentary immunity, and imposed party closures via Constitutional Court rulings. Combined with frequent detentions, surveillance, and the criminalization of pro-Kurdish rhetoric, these mechanisms have systematically limited Kurdish political participation within the formal democratic process (Yilmaz 2018).

These included the People's Labour Party (HEP) in 1993, the Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖZDEP) in 1993, the Democracy Party (DEP) in 1994, the People' Democratic Party (HADEP) in 2003, the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2009, and the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), which was partly neutralized through local commissariats. Nevertheless, these organizations laid the foundations for pluralist political action oriented toward building alliances with marginalized groups, ideas later adopted by the HDP. Another significant element in the movement's history is the involvement of civil society organizations and youth movements, such as the Kurdish political and cultural forums that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. The HDP's current pluralist and intersec-

tional strategy reflect their legacy of resistance and mobilization. Through the HDP, they sought to aggregate different social and political demands, including women's rights, ethnic and religious minorities, environmental justice, and LGBTQ+ rights. The founding of the HDP marked a decisive moment for the Kurdish movement, which intended to break the political isolation of Kurdish forces by involving non-Kurdish activists and social movements, such as feminists, ecologists, and socialists, in a coalition capable of challenging the authoritarianism and nationalism of the Turkish Republic. In 2013, the HDP consolidated its identity by participating in the Gezi Parkı events, a crucial moment for opposition politics in Turkey. Although the participation of the Kurdish movement in the initial protests was limited, the HDP quickly recognized the importance of this mobilization and offered its political solidarity, consolidating the perception of the party as a transversal force capable of representing democratic demands, from opposition to authoritarianism to the promotion of political ecology. This role strengthened its profile as a national actor, going beyond Kurdish claims to include broad layers of civil society.

Following the outcome of the 2015 parliamentary elections, the HDP consolidated its role as the country's third political force, representing a democratic and pluralist alternative. However, the government interpreted the party's electoral success as a threat to the AKP's stability of power (Geri 2016; O'Connor and Baser 2018). Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party reacted harshly: political polarization increased, along with a resurgence of violence in the south-eastern region of the country, where the HDP had gained a majority in 14 provinces (these provinces include Diyarbakır, Şırnak, Van, Hakkâri, Ağrı, Mardin, Siirt, Batman, Muş, Tunceli, Iğdır, Bingöl, Bitlis, and Kars).

The AKP's failure to maintain an absolute majority in parliament, with only 258 seats out of 550, a significant drop compared to the previous 2011 elections, where it had obtained 49.8 per cent of the vote, was a blow to Erdoğan's presidential transformation project (Bechev 2022). The Turkish parliamentary elections of June 2015 represented a turning point for the country's political landscape, showing a greater diversification of parliament. For the first time, representatives from ethnic and religious minorities and the LGBTQ+ community were elected, such as feminists Özlem Şen and Gülistan Aydogdu in Mersin and Ankara, respectively. Another significant element was the increase in women's representation, with 97 women elected (or 17.6 per cent of the 550 seats), the highest number in Turkish history up to that time.[1] The distribution of elected women among the main political parties was heterogeneous:

Justice and Development Party (AKP): 41 women, representing 13.4 per cent of the party's seats; Republican People's Party (CHP): 21 women, accounting for 15.9 per cent of their parliamentary representation, Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP): 32 women account for forty per cent of the party's seats, a result achieved thanks to the adoption of the "zip system," which guarantees gender alternation in the electoral lists, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP): three women accounted for 3.7 per cent of their seats.[2]

The HDP's results highlighted significant progress in elected women and inclusion of marginalized groups like Kurds and Yazidis, establishing a progressive model in 2015 Turkey. However, many provinces still lacked women representatives, especially in conservative areas, and electoral rules often favoured male-dominated party list placements. Despite these advances, deep challenges remain for Turkey's democratization and inclusion efforts. Repression soon intensified, with many HDP leaders arrested and accusations linking the party to the PKK, shifting the country toward authoritarianism and limiting opposition rights.

After the failure of the peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK in 2015, the HDP was subjected to systematic repression (Yilmaz 2018). On November 4, 2016, the party's co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were arrested along with other senior party members in a coordinated operation. The main charges included "membership in a terrorist organization", "terrorist propaganda," (Yeğen 2022, 945) and alleged role in the 2014 unrest related to the protests for Kobane, during which there were violent clashes and at least 37 deaths (Pierini 2017).[3] These charges were mainly based on public speeches and political activities, with no concrete evidence linking the leaders to specific violence. Their detention was made possible by a constitutional amendment passed in May 2016, which lifted the parliamentary immunity of many HDP deputies. The analysis also draws on key judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), particularly *Yüksekdağ Şenoğlu and Others v. Türkiye* (Applications Nos. 14332/17 and 12 others) and *Selahattin Demirtaş v. Türkiye (No. 2)* (Application No. 14305/17). These judgments demonstrate that the prolonged detention of Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ was intended primarily to suppress political pluralism and restrict freedom of political debate, in violation of Articles 5 and 18 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Although the ECtHR ordered their release, both leaders remain imprisoned on additional charges arising from subsequent judicial proceedings. Demirtaş faces cumulative prison sentences

of up to 42 years, while Yüksekdağ faces sentences of up to 30 years.

This wave of repression was accompanied by increasing media censorship and intensified political violence, particularly in Kurdish-majority regions where the conflict escalated. In the following years, the repressive climate against the HDP worsened further. In March 2021, the Attorney General of the Turkish Supreme Court submitted an investigation to the Turkish Constitutional Court, which requested the party's closure (Yeğen 2022). The main accusation was that it acted as an extension of the PKK, an organization considered terrorist by Turkey and undermined the indivisible integrity of the state with its territory and nation (Oran 2020; Yeğen 2017). The investigation included allegations based on public statements and participation in demonstrations. It alleged connections between the HDP and the PKK without presenting concrete evidence of direct links between the party and terrorist actions.[4] The Turkish Constitutional Court, after an initial rejection due to procedural incompleteness, accepted the case in June 2021. Among the prosecutor's demands was not only the closure of the party but also a five-year ban on political participation for 451 HDP members, including co-chairs Mithat Sancar and Pervin Buldan (Gökmen and Parim 2022; Köse 2017). The closure of the HDP is not only a direct attack on the party but also an attempt to neutralize an important platform for democratic and pluralist demands in Turkey (Gunes 2020). This article demonstrates how this approach of the HDP not only shifts the focus from ethnic recognition to recognition of plurality but also seeks to articulate an inclusive politics that redefines notions of belonging in Turkey and does so by drawing on the concepts of intersectionality, conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991, 1989) and Collins (2015), a theory that explores how different forms of discrimination, oppression, and inequality interconnect and influence the experiences of individuals who belong to more than one socially marginalized group. Crenshaw (1989), in particular, introduced the concept of intersectionality to describe how identities of race, gender, class, and other social categories overlap, creating unique experiences of discrimination that cannot be understood in isolation. According to Crenshaw, the system of oppression does not operate along separate lines. However, it interacts in ways that make it difficult to analyse a person's experience without considering the multiplicity of his or her identities.

Collins (2008; 2015) further expands this perspective, emphasising how intersectionality is an essential theoretical framework for understanding power dynamics and oppression. Collins (2008) proposes an approach that considers

the intersections of race, social class, gender, and other dimensions of social identity, highlighting how these factors influence social and cultural structures. In his analysis, intersectionality is not only a methodology for studying individuals' experiences but also a lens for understanding the power structures that perpetuate inequality: "Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that oppressions work together to produce injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organised. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression" (Collins 2008, 98).

Intersectionality is central to understanding this dynamic, as the HDP recognizes how intersectional oppressions based on gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are rooted in disciplinary and hegemonic power structures. This approach manifests itself in the diversity of the party's leadership and political coalitions. The HDP includes figures like Garo Paylan, an Armenian community member advocating minority rights and reconciliation, particularly on the Armenian genocide,[5] and Hüda Kaya, an Islamic activist and feminist promoting a pluralistic, intersectional platform (Tekdemir 2021). The party has also collaborated with transnational leftist movements like Syriza and Podemos, aligning horizontal social mobilizations with institutional leftist populism. These efforts highlight the HDP's ability to bridge diverse affiliations and foster cooperation among historically opposing groups in Turkish society. This dual approach has enabled the party to build a popular identity based on resistance to neoliberalism and authoritarianism, embodying what Ömer Tekdemir (2021) calls a "politics of hope" as opposed to the "apocalyptic politics" promoted by the AKP.

As we are pointed out by Tekdemir (2021, 114) argues, the HDP's political strategy combined "the horizontal layer of political engagement of the many (or biopolitical multitude) with the vertical politics of the party, thereby creating 'a popular unity' in which the party functioned as more than a conventional electoral organization. This "coalition of civil and political society provided the historical preconditions to enable the HDP to become a 'voice of the voiceless' in the parliamentary system". As Tekdemir (2021, 114) further notes, the party leadership employed the slogan "we are going to the parliament" to express the will of those who had been excluded from the national political sphere because they did not support the AKP." The HDP, therefore, as argued by this research,

has been an innovative example of a populist left, combining the principles of radical pluralism with an institutional commitment to transform democratic structures from within. However, increasing state repression and the criminalization of the party have strained the sustainability of this political project, leading to the marginalization of pluralist discourse and the reactivation of antagonistic logic between the state and ethnic minorities.

This study examines the HDP's post-nationalist and intersectional politics and their impact on Turkey and the Middle East. While the post-2003 Middle East is often framed as sectarian, the 2011 uprisings primarily targeted authoritarianism and inequality rather than ethnic or religious divides. Kurdish politics is frequently viewed through an ethno-nationalist lens, paralleling Arab sectarianism, which limits a nuanced understanding. The HDP represents a critical case of post-nationalism in this complex political landscape (Houston 2008; Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2019). Post-nationalism, as theorized by scholars such as Soysal (1994), Jacobson (1996), and Sassen (2006), focuses on the construction of political identities that transcend traditional ethnic and national lines, promoting a politics of inclusion and cooperation among diverse social and political groups. This theory challenges the idea that ethnic and national identity should be the foundation of identity politics. Soysal (1994), in his work on post-national citizenship, argues that universal human rights and global mobility redefine political affiliations. Jacobson (1996) emphasises the influence of international norms on national identities, while Sassen (2006) highlights how globalization and migration transform political belonging and participation structures.

Post-nationalist theories provide a critical lens for understanding identity and belonging beyond state-centric views. Hanscam (2019) suggests that post-nationalism emphasises a shared humanity that transcends national boundaries, while Sarmela (2015) sees it as an inevitable evolution linked to global interdependence. Appadurai (1996) critiques nationalism and encourages "thinking beyond the nation." Sutherland (2012, 25) connects post-nationalism to cultural hybridity, analyzing emerging social relations in a globalized world. Özkırımlı (2005) describes it as a reflection of globalization's evolutionary process, offering a framework to interpret political and cultural changes challenging traditional national models (Spinner-Halev 2008). Appadurai (1996), in particular, calls for rethinking the limits imposed by national logic, leading post-nationalism to become a valuable critical lens for analysing innovative political and social practices. This perspective finds concrete application in

the political agenda of the HDP, analysed as a primary source in this article, which combines a post-nationalist approach with intersectional practices to promote an inclusive democratic project. The HDP transcends Kurdish nationalism, embracing diverse identities and struggles to redefine belonging within a state framework. Post-nationalist theories go beyond critiquing nationalism to advocate for pluralistic, inclusive political communities. However, tensions within post-nationalism raise questions about whether the "post" signifies an epistemological break or a chronological shift and whether the concept critiques globalist hegemony or aligns with it. Post-nationalism could refer to the time after nationalism or a different way of experiencing nationalism, with significant implications for contemporary geopolitics and the politics of subject formation (Appadurai 1996; Habermas 2016).

A concrete example of the HDP's inclusiveness is the party's commitment to the LGBTQ+ community. In the 2014 municipal elections, the HDP was the first party in Turkey to nominate candidates from the LGBTQ+ community, including Asya Elmas, a transgender activist, for a seat on the Kadıköy district council in Istanbul (Celep 2018).[6] This decision represented a significant step toward the visibility and recognition of LGBTQ+ rights in a hostile political and social environment. However, the overall context of LGBTQ+ rights in Turkey remains problematic. President Erdoğan has refused to recognize these rights, stating that the Turkish public "is not ready."[7] Abuse and discrimination are common; some provisions of the legal code formalize discrimination, allowing prosecutors, police, or judges to target LGBTQ+ citizens with charges based on vague laws against "public exhibitionism" or "offenses against public morality".[8] An emblematic example of such a discriminatory climate date back to 2010, when Selma Aliye Kavaf, then minister for women and family affairs, called homosexuality "a biological disorder, a disease."[9] This episode reflects a political and social attitude that systematically marginalizes the LGBTQ+ community despite some attempts at inclusion by progressive parties such as the HDP. LGBTQ+ candidacies within the party signalled a new political direction and highlighted the persistent gap between inclusive rhetoric and the reality of structural discrimination (Yeğen 2022). This strategic approach, consistent with the HDP's involvement in the Gezi Park protests, not only broadened its electoral base but solidified its position as a progressive, cross-cultural force capable of uniting diverse social demands under a single inclusive and pluralistic political agenda. This multicultural and trans-ethnic vision marked a turning point, positioning the party as a national rather than a regional political

force. This ability to include a wide range of identities and instances is rooted in the theories of Soysal (1994), who proposes a post-national conception of citizenship, in which membership is defined not only by ethnicity or territory but also by universal values such as human rights and inclusiveness.

The HDP has utilized intersectionality to address overlapping oppressions, ethnic, gender, religious, and social. It introduced the co-chair system for gender-equal leadership and opposed environmentally harmful infrastructure projects to support local communities. These initiatives symbolize the HDP's commitment to challenging patriarchy in politics and promoting environmental sustainability, reflecting its innovative vision of equality and inclusivity. A notable example is the protest against the construction of the Ilısu Dam, a project that would have submerged the ancient city of Hasankeyf (22 dams built for the Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi -Southeastern Anatolia Project), irreversibly damaging a unique cultural heritage and displacing and tearing thousands of people away from their cultural roots (Warner 2012), in this regard Conde (2016) specifies how: "The hard-power purpose of the dams is shown, Kurdish leaders say, by the very fact that hundreds of Kurdish towns have been drowned under the artificial lakes created. This has resulted in a vast Kurdish diaspora in Europe, in cities all over Turkey, and, of course, in towns in East and Southeast Anatolia, such as Diyarbakir" (Conde 2016, 51). The HDP supports sustainable, environmentally friendly development and promotes active community participation through municipal councils and inclusive decision-making. Its efforts aim to decentralize power and empower women, youth, and minorities, exemplified by co-presidency models in Diyarbakır, Van, and Mardin, ensuring gender balance and local involvement as alternatives to centralized governance.

However, following the failed 2016 coup and the declaration of a state of emergency (*Olağanüstü Hal*, OHAL), these practices were drastically discontinued (Özkut and Aşçı 2020).[10] The central government used the OHAL to justify the massive dismissal of elected HDP mayors, replacing them with trustees (*kayyum*). As reported by Tutkal (2021), the state narrative justified these replacements in the name of national security and administrative efficiency but, in practice, aimed to eliminate local structures perceived as a threat to state centralism (Yeğen 2004). Between 2016 and 2020, approximately 59 municipalities administered by the HDP were placed under government-appointed trustees, a move that drastically curtailed local autonomy and reversed significant strides toward inclusive and participatory governance[11] (Coşkun

2016; Lang 2015; Tutkal 2021). The OHAL was used to justify extraordinary measures and normalize a regime that suppresses dissent and stifles political diversity (Özkut and Aşçı 2020). Appointing government trustees to Kurdish municipalities aimed to dismantle the HDP's vision of democratic confederalism and decentralization of power. Tutkal (2021) points out this intervention reflects the Turkish government's broader authoritarian strategy to consolidate state power and limit Kurdish political self-determination.

This combination of post-nationalism and intersectionality offers an innovative political inclusiveness model that challenges traditional membership and power structures. The HDP's political agenda claims not to limit itself to representing only Kurdish citizens but to strive to unify diverse demands through an "equivalential chain" (Laclau 2008; Mouffe 2018). It uses universal symbols such as "democracy" and "social justice," thus successfully linking heterogeneous claims under a common political identity.

The Strategy of Empty and Floating Signifiers: The HDP as a Model of Inclusiveness and Political Adaptability

The HDP adopts a language that unites various demands under universal symbols, such as "democracy" and "human rights", which serve as "empty signifiers" in Laclau's (2008) terminology. The HDP thus adopts an "equivalential chain" strategy, as defined by Mouffe (2018), in which different social demands can unite under a shared political identity. This allows the party to mobilize support from different groups, from Kurdish minorities to ecological communities, from feminist movements to religious minorities. Laclau (2008) suggests that "empty signifiers" can serve as a shared space for various ideals and goals, allowing groups with different needs to unite around common causes. In this sense, terms like "democracy" and "social justice" are crucial for the HDP, as they represent values that transcend ethnic identities and regional particularisms. With these broad signifiers, the HDP succeeds in building an inclusive popular identity that unites Kurdish demands for recognizing ethnic rights with other demands, such as environmental justice, women's rights, and social equality. These empty signifiers are powerful tools for maintaining a unified identity, allowing for cooperation that challenges the exclusivity of nationalism, political authoritarianism, and economic neoliberalism of the Turkish state. The HDP's strategy, marked by flexibility and adaptability, aligns with Laclau's (2008) concept of "fluctuating signifiers." In response to Turkey's

shifting political landscape, the HDP adjusts its language and priorities to address state repression, alliances, and electoral outcomes. This adaptability sustains its relevance in a polarized context, enabling support for oppressed groups. The concept of "democratic unity" is dynamically reinterpreted to maintain cohesion among diverse groups under a unified political vision.

Through this structure, the HDP constructs a "political frontier" that, following Laclau (2008), symbolically separates the party's supporters from those who advocate centralist and authoritarian nationalism. This political frontier is not rigid but adapts according to the pressures and tensions of the political environment. For example, the HDP has leveraged messages of resistance and unity in intense repression. At the same time, in relative stability phases, its inclusiveness and cooperation positions have been accentuated. This mobility of the frontier allows it to maintain a cohesive identity despite the various demands, helping to create a democratic opposition bloc that challenges Turkish authoritarianism. Slogans such as *Bu daha başlangıç* ("This is Just the Beginning") or *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* ("Woman, Life, Freedom") have taken on a substantial symbolic value, serving as a rallying call for those struggling against repression. Mouffe (2013; 2018), drawing on the theories of Laclau (2008), sees leftist populism as a means of constructing an "equivalential chain", defined as a set of heterogeneous demands that, while retaining their specificity, unite into a single political articulation through a common signifier that symbolically represents their unity (Laclau 2008). This notion is central to Laclau's (2008) theory of discourse, which interprets politics as the site of articulation and construction of collective identities. The "equivalential chain" allows for aggregating different demands, such as social justice, minority rights, and the struggle against authoritarianism, into a typical political project capable of challenging neoliberal and authoritarian power structures. While not eliminating differences between the various groups, this process allows them to converge toward a shared goal, offering an alternative to the dominant hegemonic narratives (Mouffe 2018). The HDP, in this context, can be interpreted as an example of leftist populism, in which different communities identify with shared values such as equality and democracy. The construction of a popular identity in Turkey is not tied to an ethnic identity or a particular ideology but rather to an open, cross-community vision that challenges authoritarian nationalism. The HDP represents a concrete example of how "empty signifiers" and "floating signifiers" can be used to build a broad coalition. The party manages to unite diverse demands under common symbols such as "democracy" and "human

rights", which serve as spaces of convergence while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to emerging political challenges. This strategy not only consolidates the HDP as an opposition movement in Turkey but also offers an example of how leftist parties can promote an inclusive political vision that values the plurality of identities without binding itself to any specific ethnicity or ideology, enriching the Turkish political landscape with a proposal for democratic and comprehensive cohesion.

The HDP's approach, as argued in this article, is based on the adoption of the "empty signifier" and "democracy", a term that, while seemingly generic, acquires symbolic value in representing and shaping a broad coalition of diverse social demands, thus representing an interesting experiment in "leftist populism". For Laclau (2008), the empty signifier is a flexible and universal concept, a symbol around which multiple identities can be aggregated. The HDP uses "democracy" as a central signifier to unify diverse demands from ethnic, religious, cultural minorities, and social movements under the ideals of justice and participation. It serves as both a theoretical unity and a practical tool, representing the broad Turkish population and challenging authoritarianism. Its concept of democracy is active, inclusive, and adaptable, changing according to political contexts like state repression or elections. This flexibility allows the HDP to maintain cohesion and respond to the varied needs of its coalition members.

The HDP constructs a flexible political frontier, inspired by Laclau (2008) and Mouffe (2018) dividing supporters of democracy from supporters of authoritarianism. This border shifts with the political climate, especially as government crackdowns force the HDP to form complex alliances, such as supporting broader opposition coalitions like the CHP, which has a nuanced stance on minority issues. In HDP-controlled Kurdish municipalities, local governance emphasised democratic participation, social justice, and environmental protection. During the 2019 elections, the HDP resisted state-imposed provincial governors that undermined local autonomy (Kaya 2019). However, post-2019 developments complicate the narrative. Reports, such as those in *Daily Sabah*, frame the removal of HDP administrations as improving public services and infrastructure under state control. Despite these claims, the forced ousting of elected officials highlights critical issues of centralism, political repression, and its implications for local democracy and minority rights.

Left Populism and Post-Nationalism: The HDP between Equivalential Chains and Democratic Confederalism

The HDP embodies left populism as theorized by Mouffe (2018), aiming to create an "equivalential chain" that unites diverse social groups under a single political initiative to challenge existing power structures. By transcending traditional ethnic, ideological, and social divides, the HDP has allied with various movements, including the Republican People's Party (CHP) and Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), as well as feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations. This collaboration successfully links demands for gender equality, ethnic minority rights, and local autonomy. From a post-nationalist perspective, the HDP, adopting Mouffe's (2018) and Laclau's (2008) view, does not merely promote a single identity or cause but aims to build a "political community" that transcends ethnic and national barriers, uniting various social groups in a common struggle against neoliberal power structures. Through democratic confederalism, the HDP emphasises the decentralization of power and the distribution of autonomy among local communities rather than creating an independent Kurdish nation-state.

The concept of the "equivalential chain" relates to intersectionality theory, showing how different layers of oppression, ethnic, class, gender, sexual, are interconnected. The HDP appeals to diverse marginalized groups, including Turkish women and LGBTQ+ activists, demonstrating a leftist populist "politics of alliance" as Mouffe (2018) suggests. The HDP unites minority rights and social justice under symbols like "democracy" and "social justice", creating an inclusive identity that transcends traditional divisions. It critiques the nation-state, promoting "democratic confederalism" a post-national model emphasising local autonomy, decentralization, and direct participation. Opposing ethnic nationalism, the HDP advocates for inclusive governance, cultural diversity, and cooperation, exemplified in its municipalities with policies like participatory democracy and gender co-leadership. Influenced by Öcalan and Bookchin, this model envisions a post-national, bottom-up political order rooted in democracy, gender equality, and ecological sustainability (Balci 2016; Öcalan 2015). Öcalan delineates a paradigm of democratic modernity that stands in contrast to the centralized, hierarchical logic characteristic of the nation-state. Instead, he advocates for a system based on communal economies and collective self-governance (Parlar Dal 2016). Nevertheless, although the HDP draws extensively from Öcalan's conceptual framework, a notable

tension emerges between his ideological stance, which is rooted in the Kurdish liberation movement and intricately linked to a specific ethno-political history, and the party's broader, post-nationalist, and inclusive political project aimed at transcending ethnic identities to appeal to a wider Turkish electorate. This dichotomy complicates the HDP's capacity to fully dissociate itself from an ethnically marked political framework and raises critical questions regarding the feasibility of reconciling a project cantered on Kurdish self-determination with a universalist, cross-ethnic democratic agenda.

Since 2016, especially after the 2019 local elections, the Turkish state has repressed democratic confederalism by replacing elected HDP mayors with government-appointed trustees, known as *kayyums*. By 2019, many municipalities had their mayors removed, leaving only 15 in office until 2023. This underscores political repression and an attack on the HDP's grassroots democracy. International bodies have condemned these actions as violations of democratic principles. The replacement of elected officials highlights the ongoing contestation and constraints faced by democratic confederalism within a centralized, securitized Turkish state. The evolution of Kurdish politics in Turkey reveals a significant shift through the post-nationalist and intersectional strategy adopted by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which positions itself within a broader democratic and inclusive movement. Rather than reinforcing ethnic or national divisions, the HDP has sought to transcend them by forging coalitions with left-wing, feminist, ecological, and minority-based movements. This approach reflects post-nationalist theoretical frameworks that emphasise inclusivity, intergroup cooperation, and the reimagining of political community beyond ethnonational boundaries. Although frequently labelled a "pro-Kurdish" party, the HDP articulates a form of inclusive populism that resonates with the theories of Laclau (2008) and Mouffe (2018), advancing a pluralist political vision that redefines belonging and democratic participation within the Turkish context. The HDP's proposal for inclusive, plural citizenship distinguishes its democratic model from nationalist approaches that emphasise "Turkishness" as the basis of identity. Instead, the HDP promotes a form of citizenship that values ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, advocating for civil and political rights for minorities like Armenians, Alevis, Assyrians, and Yazidis. This approach challenges traditional policies of assimilation and exclusion, envisioning a democracy rooted in universal equality and cultural recognition, and opposing the monolithic view of the Turkish state. and participatory democracy, in line with the theories of Laclau (2008) and Mouffe (2018).

By using "empty and fluctuating signifiers," constructing a "flexible political frontier," and promoting a post-national identity, the HDP is a concrete example of how inclusive populism can build a plural popular identity. In a context of intense repression and polarization, the HDP shows how left-wing populism can serve as a unifying force, redefining sovereignty and proposing inclusive citizenship with a view to social justice and community autonomy. The HDP's strategy unites diverse claims into a common identity as an alternative to Turkish nationalism and authoritarianism. Its agenda promotes social, ecological, gender, and cultural justice through inclusive populism and radical democracy, emphasising local self-governance and citizen participation regardless of ethnicity or religion. The HDP aims to reshape the economy for universal living standards and advocates for gender equality, labour rights, and minority protections to eliminate societal inequalities. Challenging the neoliberal paradigm that harms workers and disadvantaged minorities, the HDP prioritizes workers' rights over capital interests, as analysed by Tutkal (2021). Despite claims that its local administrations are ineffective, the HDP advocates for participatory democracy through community assemblies, gender equality, and sustainable development, emphasising social and ecological justice. Its stance opposes the Turkish government's neoliberal authoritarianism, favouring decentralization and intersectional demands. In Kurdish municipalities, broader tensions between state centralization and community self-determination are evident, with the HDP positioning itself as the "voice of the voiceless" (Kaya 2019, 235).

Conclusions

The HDP's post-nationalist and intersectional approach have reshaped democratic participation in Turkey by building alliances with feminists, environmentalists, leftists, and minorities, promoting pluralism, equality, and social justice (Celep 2018). Key to this is *Türkiyelileşme*, which aimed to extend the party's appeal beyond its Kurdish base and create a democratic coalition based on shared grievances rather than identities. This strategy helped the HDP expand its electoral support, leading to its historic success in June 2015. However, this moment of pluralistic affirmation was swiftly succeeded by a decline into repression, precipitated by the breakdown of the peace process and a resurgence of state violence. The same pluralist and inclusive ethos that contributed to the HDP's initial ascent subsequently rendered it vulnerable to state repression, as intensifying securitization measures, the criminalization of the party, and mass arrests collectively undermined the fragile coalition

the party had constructed. The HDP's model of democratic confederalism, inspired by Öcalan and Bookchin, emphasises bottom-up governance, gender equality, and ecological sustainability, offering an alternative to centralized state power. However, its implementation faces obstacles, such as the appointment of *kayyum* (state trustees) replacing democratically elected HDP mayors, which challenges local autonomy and hampers effective governance. While the HDP advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, the impact remains largely symbolic amid pervasive homophobia and stagnant laws. Overall, the HDP acts as a disruptive force in Turkey's hegemonic landscape, uniting marginalized ethnic, gender, environmental, and class issues into a counter-hegemonic bloc. Drawing on Laclau (2008) and Mouffe's (2018) frameworks, it constructs a "chain of equivalence" among diverse social forces, challenging Turkish political boundaries. Internal debates question whether expanding the party's appeal dilutes its Kurdish self-determination. Some fear the *Türkiyelileşme* project softens Kurdish demands for Turkish leftist audiences. The coalition faces challenges like fragmentation and ideological strains. The Turkish state portrays the HDP as a threat, using closures, arrests, and suppression to silence it. Despite this, the HDP acts as a counter-conduct, challenging state definitions of citizenship and offering a vision of democracy beyond the nation-state. Its trajectory remains fragile, exposing political limits and hinting at alternatives, making the HDP a site of contestation, rupture, and ongoing political reimagining amid repression and hope.

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Notes

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